



THE PROPHETIC CHURCH (PART 5)

The anti-prophetic history of the visible Church

MAIN CHALLENGE

In the 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity, and the Church became part of the Roman establishment rather than a persecuted minority. Although the Christians at the time accepted this as a "God-event", it actually led to them compromising their key role as a prophetic body for the sake of an easier, more prosperous and more successful life in society. This situation persisted in western cultures right through to the 20th century, and many modern Christians look back on it as a positive era for the faith. A Christianised society holds many surface advantages for Christians and for the progress of the gospel, however the ultimate issue must be whether or not it leads people to salvation. Since the main thing that is compromised in a Christian society is the absolute need to surrender the self-life to Jesus, such a society actually leads people away from salvation, and not towards it. Are you a true disciple – someone who has bowed the knee to Jesus – or are you merely a cultural Christian?

We are examining the nature and purpose of the Church from the standpoint of the key Scripture found in Joel 2:28-29 and Ac. 2:16ff, namely that we are called to be a prophetic people. This means we are fundamentally a people endowed with the personal presence of the Spirit of God, called to speak God's word into the darkness and ignorance of a world without God and required to live lives consistent with the message and example of Jesus, so that people will recognise that we are those who have "been with Jesus".

In a previous message, we identified three key dimensions of that calling: our primary identifier, our primary role in society, and our primary behaviour requirement. In the last three messages, we looked at what happens when a body of believers forgets in turn each of these markers. It was not a pretty picture.

However, we need to go further along this negative line and examine the alternative model the historic Church adopted for around 1600 years, a model which is still prevalent today. Even though it offers certain surface advantages to believers and the cause of Christ, nevertheless, this model is completely antithetical to the prophetic calling of the Church. I am referring to the model which sees the Church as occupying a significant role of worldly political and social power in human society.

A recap of what our prophetic calling means

What I am going to say in this message will be controversial for a number of modern, western Christians; so, before I say it, we need to recap the main points of what I have established in the previous four messages, so that the basis for what I am about to say can be clearly understood.

- Firstly, the Church of Jesus Christ has a divine calling and destiny to be a prophetic people, fulfilling the words of Joel 2:28-29; and we will not achieve



God's purposes for us until we surrender ourselves completely to his plans and his plans alone.

- Secondly, this prophetic destiny requires us to bear the presence of the Holy Spirit into our lost and dying world; to speak his word fearlessly into the darkness around us; and to live in a way that is consistent with our message and the example of Jesus.
- Thirdly, when the Church loses its primary identifier as a people of the Spirit, it becomes a religion rather than a prophetic body, seeking to make converts to its beliefs rather than seeking to transform sinners into saints by the power of God working from the inside-out.
- Fourthly, the prophetic message we have to bring includes several non-negotiable elements: the centrality of God's love expressed through forgiveness; the need for all people to be reconciled to God by surrendering their self-life to Jesus; the fact that God has no plans to save "the world" *en masse*, but rather to save people out of this world (which is destined for destruction) into the new creation of his heavenly kingdom; and the need for us to not cling to this world or to our own fleshly abilities, but to live for the coming kingdom in the power of the Spirit.
- Fifthly, that there are several false messages we can preach that are worse than others, because they directly violate the prophetic message God requires us to be faithful to. These messages include judgmentalism; shock and outrage over sin; messages that pick and choose certain sins to condemn and others to excuse; messages that focus on outward appearances ("sins of the flesh") rather than the state of the heart; messages that compromise the need to surrender the self-life to God; and messages that prioritise our safety and security in this world rather than our eternal destiny in the new creation.
- And sixthly, when the Church walks in religious hypocrisy – putting on an outward appearance of spirituality to cover up our inward sins – this is the worst possible sin we can commit, for it is a complete denial of the prophetic message that we are the people who are learning to surrender our self-lives to Jesus. It is also a direct contradiction of the main character trait Jesus our Lord commanded us to exhibit, the transparency and humility that what is happening on the inside is far more significant than what appears to be happening on the outside.

When we go through this set of implications of the Church being a prophetic body, two things are quite self-evident: firstly, that the sins which are the most damnable (in every sense of the word) are the ones we in the western Church seem to struggle the most with; and secondly, this seems to be in stark contrast to the state of the early Church as portrayed in the New Testament! For example, look at the Church described in Paul's two letters to the Corinthians – these were immature, fleshly Christians by anyone's definition, but their sins were not "religious" ones. Those early Christians had problems with sexual immorality, fleshly behaviour, false doctrines, and so on, but they were all sins that flowed from not being entirely free from their worldly background, they were not sins that contradicted their primary prophetic calling.



We need to ask one simple question in response to this observation: why are we in the modern, western world so different?

A brief look at our early history

If we are to understand why the western Church seems to have lost its way with respect to its prophetic calling, we need to understand a bit of our history over the past two thousand years. As human beings, we tend to model our behaviour on the things we have inherited from previous generations; very rarely do we make fundamental changes to what has been handed down to us. If we are to understand why we are the way we are (and possibly, by God's grace, to change that), we need to understand the lessons from history, what the forces are that have shaped who we have become.

Towards the end of the 1st century, the Christian Church experienced its first major shift. At that time, the believers began to grow in number within the Roman Empire, and began to organise themselves. A hierarchical structure of bishops and archbishops was adopted, similar to what is found in the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches today. At the same time, the Church lost touch with its Jewish heritage as the new believers were Gentile Greeks rather than Jews. The Gentile Greeks (by and large) did not understand the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament, but understood and were far more comfortable with religious groups based around ideas.

At this stage, the Christian Church evolved from being a consciously prophetic body within the Hebrew tradition, and began to become a new, separately identifiable religion.

This transformation was gradual, and (taken by itself) was not of major significance; the faith continued to grow, and maintained its faithfulness to the core message and largely behaved consistently with this message. Thus, the Church still functioned as a prophetic body; the main issue was that they did not seem to understand or emphasise that identity. However, this loss of understanding did open the door to the second major transformation in the Church, which was far more significant.

Over the first three centuries, the Christian Church experienced sporadic bouts of persecution from their pagan neighbours. This was predictable; indeed, Jesus warned his followers to expect it (see Jn 15:18ff). They were persecuted because the way they lived – loving and serving the poor, and living lives of moral purity – convicted the world of its sin. Thus, there was a direct link between the growth in the Christian Church (scholars estimate that between 10% and 50% of the Roman Empire was Christian by 300 AD) and the persecutions they encountered. Nevertheless one can understand why the early Christians would have hated the persecutions they encountered, and prayed earnestly for a solution to this “problem”.

Well, a “solution” did come in the early 4th century, and it changed the future of Christianity right through to the present day. Moreover, those early Christians did embrace the change, seeing it as a miracle of God. I contend, however, based on the teaching of Scripture and on the long-term results of this “solution”, that it was actually a temptation into sin that those believers fell into, and one that we are still reaping the consequences of today.



How the 4th century Church lost its prophetic way

The “solution” I am talking about was the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, and it happened over the course of only a couple of generations. The last great persecutions under the Romans finished in AD 304; but from AD 381 onwards, Christians were no longer the persecuted minority but the entrenched “powers that be”, and those who opposed Christianity began to be persecuted themselves.

If this had happened over night, it is hard to imagine that the genuine Christians in the Church would have tolerated it; but it happened in stages, and each stage seemed to have the hallmarks of being a “God moment” in history¹. It started with an experience of a general called Constantine who had a vision that he would conquer his enemies if he fought under the sign of the Christian God. He did so; he won the victory at Milvian Bridge on 28 October, AD 312, and went on to become the Emperor, Constantine the Great. For the first time, the Christians had an Emperor on the throne who was “theirs”.

Naturally, the Christians rejoiced; and who can blame them? They interpreted Constantine’s conversion as a miracle, and there may well be a lot of truth in that. However, Constantine did not behave as a Christian ought; he was a typical Roman politician, murdering his opponents and in general doing most of the things that the pagan kings did. However, he did show favour the Christian religion², and, on his deathbed, he accepted Christian baptism.

Now, how did the Christian church respond to Constantine’s conversion? Basically, they accepted him at face value and ignored his flagrant sins, not wishing to cross the one who was now their patron. In other words, they accepted his political and social support, in return for accepting him as one of their own. The Church political was born.

For many years, I was reluctant to criticise my 4th century forebears, on the grounds that it was not clear to me what they ought to have done differently. However, I have now come to a different conclusion. Scripturally speaking, there was one thing and one thing only that the Church ought to have done: they should have welcomed Constantine’s conversion, but warned him in the clearest possible terms that he needed to grow in faith the same as any other new convert; that he needed to repent, turn his self-life over to Jesus, and become a part of God’s new creation. They needed to stress that he may be the all-powerful Emperor in the flesh, but in the Spirit and in the Church he was a new-born baby, and he needed to submit to the leaders of Christ’s body rather than seeking to mould the Church in his political image.

What would have happened if the 4th century believers had followed this course? Quite possibly, Constantine would have renounced his putative faith and the persecutions would have resumed with increased intensity. This is quite probably what the Christians were afraid of. On the other hand, Constantine might have grown in his faith and become a

¹ How this is a salutary warning to all of us today!

² Was this genuine piety or mere superstition? Scholars debate this question. But who can really tell?



true saint of God, a witness of the transforming power of the gospel. Either way, the history of the next 1600 years would have been very different.

What Constantine did do was, encouraged by the sycophancy of the Church leaders, to begin to reshape Christianity as a religion capable of being the ruling force in Roman society. He called a Church council and forced the Church to agree on certain matters of doctrine concerning the person of Jesus. From Constantine's perspective, it did not matter exactly what the bishops agreed upon, so long as it was definitive; his main requirement was that he had to be able to tell who was a Christian and who was not. Outward profession of orthodox belief was all-important; the inward work of the Spirit of God was not.

Over the following decades (and under succeeding Emperors), membership of the Christian Church became more and more advantageous, both socially and politically. It was clear that the Christians were "in favour", and this drove an increase in "converts". And, the more the Christians became politically significant, the more this trend accelerated.

There were a number of attempts to revive ancient Roman religious traditions, but they were short-lived. By the end of the 4th century, Christianity had won control of the most powerful force on earth, the Roman Empire.

The pros of the Christianisation of Rome

These are the basic facts of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire; after Rome collapsed a century later, the Christianisation continued throughout the old empire, in newly formed nations in North Africa, the Middle East and Western Europe. The process extended as far as Britain in the west, and Russia and the Balkans in the East. Islam arose in the 7th century but its expansion was halted in France a hundred years later, and by the 10th century, all of Europe apart from Spain was firmly Christian, and the Middle East and Spain were Islamic. And this hardly changed for the next 1000 years.

So what do we make of this transformation, this Christianisation of western (ex-Roman) civilisation? On the one hand, we need to recognise the evident positives of this event, for this is what most of the people who experienced these events would have seen. Firstly, it was a positive for society – the moral teaching of Christ was far superior to those of the previous pagan religions, and moral standards improved enormously. Even though not everyone in western society was a true disciple of Jesus, the laws began to reflect Christian ideals, and this tended to moderate outward behaviour. The western world became a lot "easier" for Christians to live in.

Secondly, the Church now had seemingly unlimited access to financial resources. Churches were built that reflected how magnificent God really was. Missionary endeavours and charitable funds were amply supported; the Church became rich and prosperous.

Thirdly, Christianity undoubtedly spread more quickly than was otherwise possible. Mostly, it was spread by political efforts merging with spiritual ones; it was in Christian Europe's interest for neighbouring peoples to share the same religion. Often, conversion



to Christianity was used as a condition in peace treaties with conquered neighbours; once a rival king was converted (either genuinely or by force), he was encouraged to Christianise his people by making church attendance compulsory and giving people human incentives to renounce paganism and accept Christian baptism.

Fourthly, even if these people were not Christians at first, this policy of Christianisation obviously gave the Church unprecedented opportunity to evangelise whole communities with a minimum of effort. No longer did the missionaries have to go out into the highways and by-ways, risking personal harm to make disciples; now, the people were forced to come to them and hear about Jesus on the Christians' terms.

And finally, since the Church was ruling the known world, it was easy to see this as the fulfilment of prophecy that the Kingdom of God would grow and fill the earth (e.g. Dan. 2:44ff, Mk 4:26-29). A theology of "Christian triumphalism" began to emerge – surely the world was living in the promised Millennium when Christ would rule on the earth (through his Church, of course), and this state of affairs would last until the day when Christ would return. The job was done; the Church was triumphant; all that was left to do was to continue to rule the world and let God do his works.

But the cons ...?

However, these advantages need to be set in contrast with the deep negatives that the Christianisation of Europe caused. The positives were all clearly visible; but the negatives were all hidden beneath the surface, festering like gangrenous wounds that were gradually strangling the whole living organism.

Essentially, the compromise the Church made in the 4th century involved selling out their whole prophetic identity, and replacing it with a worldly, political one. Consider the steps in the process by which this change occurred:

- As already stated, Christianity became a religion defined by orthodox doctrine rather than the manifest presence of God.
- Very quickly, membership of the Church became based on a profession of faith, even where there was no real understanding of these beliefs or inward transformation by the Spirit of God. The Church accepted this gradually because it was in their political and social interests to be as large as possible, and they justified it by arguing that a partially-converted person inside the Church was closer to God than a pagan outside the Church.
- This led over time to the situation where outward observance of the rituals of the faith became more important than inward transformation. Not "rocking the boat" was very important to a Church that occupied a privileged social position; so long as someone kept up appearances and did not cause a scandal, they were generally accepted as devout Christians.
- New doctrines were developed to water down the prophetic message of the gospel and encourage the sin of religious hypocrisy. Certain sins were completely anathema (e.g. witchcraft, paganism, homosexuality, and female promiscuity),



whereas others were tolerated by the elites (presumably because they were personally subject to them – e.g. pride, worldliness, greed, and male promiscuity). The confessional became a useful tool of religious control: you could sin as freely as you wished, so long as you came to the Church and “confessed” your sins and did the penance the Church required. Holiness was no longer necessary to Christian living; doing a “deal” with God through his representatives, the priests, replaced it.

- Through all this, the Church ceased to be a witness, either in word or deed, to the new creation instituted when Jesus rose from the dead. The hope of society was no longer a resurrected body in the new creation, it was the Greek idea of “heaven when you die” – a future that was quite independent of the life people were living now.
- Ultimately (and perhaps most importantly), the Church abandoned its duty to care for the poor and the marginalised (the ones Jesus so clearly represented) and, by identifying itself with the entrenched political elites, demonstrated that it was more concerned with this world than the world to come. The hope of heaven and the fear of hell were not used as motivators towards holy living, but as cynical means of manipulating the poor and keeping them downtrodden and compliant.

The ultimate issue

In simple terms, what the Christianisation of western civilisation achieved was twofold:

1. At the outward level, a society that nominally accepted a watered-down set of teachings from the Bible, resulting in a society (in some specific areas only) that was more moral or just; but
2. At the inward level, a church that no longer functioned as God’s prophetic voice, leading to the widespread proliferation of religious hypocrisy, and multitudes of people believing they were Christians because they conformed to the standards of the visible Church, even though they did not surrender, and had no intention of surrendering, their self-life to Jesus..

The ultimate issue, therefore, is this: which of these two impacts was more significant?

Many years ago, God (I believe) challenged me on this precise issue. He reminded me of the prophet’s responsibility to be a watchman (Ez. 3:17-21)³, and then simply said: *“How many millions of people over the centuries do you think have gone to a Christless eternity thinking they were Christians ...?”* It was a question that I could not avoid; and it broke my heart.

Which is more important: the eternal destiny of human souls, or hoe outwardly “Christian” your society is? Ultimately, this is the issue every Christian man, woman or

³ See [Part III - the church off-message](#)



child has to decide. If you don't consider the matter too deeply, it is easy to assume that having a more "Christian" society would result in more people being saved; but, I submit, the evidence of the Bible, and of 1600 years of history, contradicts this assertion. For an outwardly "Christian" society is forced to compromise the gospel on the one thing that alone is vital to salvation: the need for all people to surrender their self-lives to Jesus in order to enter the Kingdom of God. According to the gospel, it doesn't matter how outwardly religious or pious you are, your destiny is eternal destruction unless you bow the knee to Jesus and surrender to him. And this is precisely the sort of people fostered by an outwardly "Christian" society: men and women who follow the religious rules and dogmas as an excuse for not bowing to the Messiah.

Conclusion

The Christianisation of western society started to unravel in the 20th century, as the weight of two world wars and declining standards of sexual morality made it impossible to maintain the myth that the west was "Christian". Nevertheless, many sincere Christians still maintain this myth, and regret the loss of Christian influence in our society, and in our political processes.

In my next message, I will discuss how this focus on social and political influence is a relic of 1600 years of societal Christianisation; how it is not a reflection of a New Testament world view; and how it continues to serve to prevent us from fulfilling our prophetic destiny as the people of the Living God.

Phil Stott

19/04/2019